



CHRISTMAS EVE WITH THE COOKS

Celebrity chef Mario Batali gathers his restaurant family together to enjoy his interpretation of the traditional Italian seafood feast.

BY KATE KRADER PHOTOGRAPHS BY QUENTIN BACON



OPPOSITE PAGE: The dinner table is set in front of the window at Mario's wine store. THIS PAGE, clockwise from top left: Fritto Misto Amalfi, a mix of deep-fried seafood; Mario cooked the meal himself; Clam and Mussel Soup; Mario and his business partner, Joe Bastianich, serving the hungry guests. FOR RECIPES, SEE INDEX ON PAGE 127.

Most chefs don't get to have a family meal at Christmas. This year, Mario Batali will have two of them. On December 25, New York's most popular cook closes his restaurants and spends the entire day with his wife, Susi, and their two young sons, Benno and Leo. But on Christmas Eve, Mario celebrates with his restaurant family. Bringing together key people from his three immensely popular eateries, Babbo, Lupa, and Esca, Mario prepares a luscious holiday meal at Italian Wine Merchants, his Union Square wine store. For him, the commemorative staff dinner makes perfect sense: "My restaurant crew is my second family. And I spend more time with them than my real family, so I should celebrate holidays with them."

Christmas Eve is a special day in the restaurant world. "Unlike every other night of the year, it's less about dining and more about family," says Joe Bastianich, Mario's restaurant and wine store partner. Joe grew up in the business—his mother is renowned chef Lidia Bastianich, owner of New York City's Felidia as well as several outposts of Lidia's around the country—and Joe can't remember a Christmas Eve when he wasn't working. "It's a day all its own; the fast-paced New York City dining scene morphs into a family experience. You have big tables of parents, grandparents, and children, all with the holiday spirit. And it pervades the restaurant."

Mario, 41, didn't grow up with professional chefs, but everyone in his household was a good cook with a culinary point of view, and family activities included canning and preserving. He was raised in Seattle; when Mario was 15, the Batalis moved to Spain and he went to high school in Madrid. He got his professional start in the kitchen at Stuff Yer Face Pizza in New Brunswick, New Jersey, where he made calzones while attending Rutgers University. He spent two weeks at the Cordon Bleu in London before he got bored; he then worked his way around Michelin-starred kitchens in England and France. After a stint in hotels in southern California, Mario made the formative decision to cook in Italy, in Emilia-Romagna, for six months—he ended up staying for three years.

Mario arrived in New York City in 1992. In quick succession, he met Susi and opened up his first restaurant, Po, in 1993, a micro 31-seat restaurant on a quaint street in Greenwich Village. There he began developing his signature cooking style, which fuses a high percentage of Italian influences with local ingredients and his own inspirations. "You would never see these dishes in an Italian kitchen," says Mario. "They feel and taste Italian, but they're not strictly Italian." He opened Babbo in 1998, and catapulted to national attention by preparing earthy but sophisticated dishes such as savory lamb's-tongue salad and calf's-brain ravioli at a time when most of New York's restaurants were serving identical versions of bistro staples like steak frites and roast chicken. Lupa, a classic, raucous Italian trattoria, opened its doors in October 1999, and Esca, an innovative



THIS PAGE, above: Mario serving salad; left, a helping of the main course, Snapper with Olives. OPPOSITE PAGE, clockwise from top left: The meal began with Grilled Shrimp in Lemon Leaves and Fritto Misto Amalfi; a simple salad; Mario enjoys the party; bread is a crucial part of any Italian meal; Mario supervises the last-minute preparations; the red snapper in all its glory, garnished with the best-quality olive oil and chopped parsley leaves. FOR RECIPES, SEE INDEX ON PAGE 127.

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Italian fish house, started business in the spring of 2000. (He sold Po in 2000.) But as famous as Mario is for his restaurant empire, he's even more recognizable as the star of the hit TV cooking shows *Molto Mario* and *Mario Eats Italy*, which features the red-haired cook riding around the country on a Vespa scooter, digging into anything that looks interesting.

To say that Mario's 10 Christmas Eve dinner guests are like family isn't an exaggeration. He's been friends with Andy Nusser, Babbo's executive chef, since the late '80s, and Andy met his wife, Patty Collins, another dinner guest, in Babbo's kitchen. Mark Ladner, Lupa's chef, originally worked in the Babbo kitchen, and Jason Denton, co-owner of Lupa, started off as a waiter at Po. Mario's other invitees include Jim Logan and Nancy Selzer, both managers at Babbo; Simon Dean, manager at Esca; and Laurie Woolever, who assists Mario on his cookbooks and television shows. The special guest is Bill Buford, fiction editor at *The New Yorker*, who gained entrance into the inner circle by participating in Mario's ultimate bonding experience: making sausages. With so many proficient cooks, one might expect that the dinner would be potluck, but feeling that too many chefs might spoil the clam soup, Mario makes everything himself. The menu is all seafood, in keeping with the Italian Christmas Eve tradition.

To start the meal, the group sips glasses of Prosecco, munches on olives and slices of homemade fennel salami (which age in a special curing room at the back of the Italian Wine Merchants store), and gossips about former cooks and waiters. Next come platters of giant sweet grilled shrimp wrapped in lemon leaves and Almalfi-style fritto misto, made with tiny bay scallops, smelts, calamari, and fresh anchovies. For the main course, Mario sautés whole red snappers until they're golden, then smothers them with olives, capers, and lemon and finishes them in a hot oven. He and Joe stand at the head of the table and take the flaky fish fillets off the bone, then serve them around with a salad of radicchio, dandelion greens, and shaved Parmigiano-Reggiano. Joe pours the wine (see sidebar, right). For dessert there's a scrumptious walnut cake layered with whipped cream, and an orange-mascarpone tart based on a recipe from the island of Capri.

At dinner, debate rages over what the ideal Christmas gift for Mario is. He's an avid fisherman and is very happy with a gift of a bright-red fishing pole. In the past, Buford has given him a wild boar from his family's game farm, which Mario made into prosciutto. This year, Buford might present him with a good bottle of wine: "Wine is one of the few culinary areas that Mario doesn't have unequivocal command over. And he has an extraordinary capacity for drinking the stuff." Mark Ladner is considering an Italian culinary gadget, such as one of the antique wine keys on display at the Wine Merchants store. Joe Bastianich's gift might just be the best: "I'd give him a day off."



THIS PAGE, left: A slice of Orange Tart, Capri Style, is a rich ending to the meal. Mario, below, made sure to save room for dessert. OPPOSITE PAGE: Sorrentine Torte in the foreground, is flavored with Italian maraschino-cherry liqueur and topped with toasted chopped walnuts. FOR RECIPES, SEE INDEX ON PAGE 127.



WINE PICKS FROM ITALIAN WINE MERCHANTS

In 1999, Mario and Joe Bastianich joined with Italian wine expert Sergio Esposito to open Italian Wine Merchants. The spare, mahogany-lined store sells varieties that represent the best quality for the price. For the Christmas Eve dinner, Joe and Sergio chose:

Prosecco Ruggeri Gold Label This sparkling wine has a much richer character and gentler bubbles than most Proseccis, making it a good match with the fritto misto.

1999 De Concillis Perella Made from Fiano grapes, this white has bright acidity and clarity, making it a good pairing for the grilled shrimp and the clam and mussel soup.

1996 Pinonero Rocche dei Manzoni This red is textured and silky, with well-integrated tannins. It's wonderful with the snapper.

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